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Alberto Fabris & Maria Vittoria Comacchi

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## Species of spaces

Alberto Fabris <sup>a,b</sup> and Maria Vittoria Comacchi <sup>a,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, Italy; <sup>b</sup>Department of Italian Studies at New York University (NYU), New York, USA; <sup>c</sup>Department of History, Indiana University Bloomington, Bloomington, IN, USA

### 1. Space(s) and power(s)<sup>1</sup>

The canonical definition of “space” provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals its nature as a multifaceted concept that resonates in different contexts. Space encompasses both temporal duration and extension, often referring to an “area or extent delimited or determined in some way.”<sup>2</sup> However, this seemingly straightforward definition belies the complexity and profound implications of the concept. Far from being neutral, space has been shaped and reshaped over the centuries by various disciplines within the social sciences and humanities.

The conceptual and historical dimensions of space have been vigorously debated, revealing its intricate layers and significant implications. Over the past forty years, the study of space has gained considerable traction in historiography, enriching our understanding of both global and local histories.<sup>3</sup> This conceptual framework has facilitated dynamic analyses of historical processes, cultural practices, and textual forms, positioning space as a critical lens through which history and temporality can be reexamined.

Michel Foucault insightfully observed that

the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space.<sup>4</sup>

Foucault’s ideological survey of space underscores its relationship to power and knowledge, highlighting how space both transforms and is transformed by these forces. In this sense, the concept of space merges into the category of spatiality, which denotes a “socially produced space” that is “constitutive of the particular ways in which the different modalities of power take effect.”<sup>5</sup>

Terms such as region, territory, territoriality, terrain, land, and landscape have often been used interchangeably or as alternatives to the notion of space. This multiplicity of terms reflects the different ways in which space has been conceptualized and used in different disciplines and historical contexts. Denis Cosgrove, for instance, traces the history of the notion of landscape back to the German *Landschaft*, suggesting a “non-inherently territorialized”<sup>6</sup> concept of space. Cosgrove’s analysis reveals that the idea of landscape functions as a syncretic “structure of vision” that mediates between aesthetic, moral, and political values. By mapping and embedding cultural values in

spatial dimensions, landscape underscores the notion that all material spaces are socially and historically constructed. Thus, landscapes are not merely passive reflections of a given societal order, but active, constitutive elements within the social, political, and economic milieu. This perspective highlights how different modes of representations, particularly the semiotics of visual imagery, play a critical role in shaping our spatial understanding. The discourse surrounding landscapes not only influences how people relate to build environments, but also indirectly helps to shape those environments by shaping values, opinions, and expectations.<sup>7</sup>

This understanding of landscape as socially and historically constructed is consistent with contemporary scholarship, which increasingly describes space as “relative” or “a function of other processes and phenomena.”<sup>8</sup> Such a relational view challenges the notion of an absolute and ostensibly objective space that was fundamental to “the territorial imperatives of the nation-state as it evolved within modern Europe.”<sup>9</sup> In this traditional narrative, Western European historiography imposed a rigid conceptualization of space, emphasizing a “primitive relation between *Ortung* and *Ordnung*, placing and order.”<sup>10</sup> Here, *Ortung* and *Ordnung* indicate a fundamental alignment between spatial positioning and sociopolitical order, reinforcing a deterministic and hierarchical view of space, as key concepts in Carl Schmitt’s theory.

By contrast, the relational approach views space as dynamic and contingent, shaped by social, economic, political, and cultural forces. This perspective aligns with Henri Lefebvre’s notion of “socially produced space,” which posits that space is not merely a passive backdrop for human activity, but is actively produced and transformed through social interactions and power relations.<sup>11</sup> In this context, space becomes a critical lens for examining the interplay between power, identity, and knowledge. For instance, the concept of territoriality goes beyond mere geographical boundaries to include the mechanisms by which power and control are exercised, contested, and negotiated within specific spatial contexts. This includes the administrative delineation of regions, the enforcement of jurisdictional boundaries, and the cultural practices that assert territorial claims, all of which are key to the profound transformations explored in this special issue.<sup>12</sup> Terrain, similarly, connotes the physical and strategic aspects of space, particularly in relation to military and geopolitical considerations, in line with Yves Lacoste’s famous critique of geographic knowledge and its epistemology.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, land emphasizes ownership, use, and stewardship, highlighting the economic and environmental dimensions of space.<sup>14</sup>

Building on these historiographical trends, the essays in this volume seek to provide a more in-depth exploration of the conceptualization of space in key early modern authors. By examining the topic from multiple perspectives, these works show that the conceptualization of space is integral to its political and rational dimensions, rooted in the epistemological foundations that support it. As many contributions demonstrate, the conceptualization of political space requires the integration of all other spaces into its logic and geometries. Therefore, the struggle for spatial control is fundamentally a struggle for a dominant spatial conception that can establish a definitive political epistemology while subsuming and neutralizing opposing viewpoints and their efforts at resistance. Rather than promoting a linear history of space conceptualization in Western Europe, this special issue aims to explore diverse theorizations of space and

their political applications within the Euro-Atlantic regions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

While the articles here do not exhaust all possible conceptions of space, they collectively challenge the monolithic notion of space that has prevailed in Western political thought. This rethinking is in keeping with the “spatial turn” that in recent decades has relativized the centrality of Western Europe in the field of early modern studies. By examining previously unexplored texts, authors, contexts, and perspectives, our contributors invite a reconsideration of the heterogeneous intellectual approaches and theoretical understandings of space(s) during a period marked by global geographical, political, and military expansions, alongside local strategies of spatial demarcation, separation, and governance.

The articles in this special issue originate from the panel “*Terra Universalis*: New Perspectives on Early Modern First Globalization,” held at the conference of the Renaissance Society of America in Dublin in 2022. We have chosen to group the four contributions thematically rather than chronologically, focusing on the interplay between power and space. The first two articles historically revisit two different authors and intellectual traditions, conventionally placed outside the standard canon of political thought, to engage with the concept of global space and reconstruct the links between new configurations of the Earth and various forms of global governance and imperialism. Conversely, the last two papers, while differing in focus and argument, offer new interpretative approaches to the spatial concepts of state, territory, and land. They explore these concepts in three different historical and intellectual contexts, ranging from southern Europe to northern Europe.

## 2. One space to rule them all

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, advances in geographic exploration catalyzed a transformative concept of spatiality that marked the beginning of a significant epistemological shift in Europe.<sup>15</sup> This paradigm revolution extended far beyond the physical expansion of maps through transoceanic voyages and fundamentally altered the perception, description, and representation of space.<sup>16</sup> For the first time, the Earth was conceptualized as a unified whole, an intellectual leap that prefigured modern understandings of global interconnectedness.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the actual visualization of this concept – a comprehensive, empirical representation of the Earth – did not materialize until 1966 with the first full-disk photograph of the planet. This image actualized the speculative vision that had evolved centuries earlier, offering “a God’s-eye” view of the world – “a perspective previously reserved for the deity and only imagined in the minds of the curious.”<sup>18</sup> For the first time since the creation of the world, cosmographers had the opportunity to fully contemplate it. This, however, required them to shape the world conceptually, echoing God’s own creative act on an epistemological and conceptual level.

This period also saw the emergence of a universal worldview both within the Roman Church and through state-sponsored cartographic efforts, shaping new philosophical and political views across the globe.<sup>19</sup> Driven by the discovery of new continents and previously unexplored regions, this expansion signified a profound shift in the conceptualization of space and time, resonating in Europe with the broader intellectual movements and the spiritual renewal of both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. The

discovery and mapping of new territories reflected a growing ambition to understand and shape the world in its entirety.

The so-called Age of Great Discoveries, encompassing geographic and astronomical advances, thus served as both a catalyst and a consequence of this profound paradigm shift. At a time when the fragmentation of the *respublica christiana* was undermining the spiritual unity and authority of the Church of Rome, the discovery of new territories provided renewed momentum and new operational horizons. The adoption of a universal perspective – which emphasized the transformative and almost divine nature of global mapping – gave institutions such as the *Congregatio de propaganda fide* unprecedented mandates to understand and govern the world in its entirety.

This new global vision, articulated in important texts such as Francesco Ingoli's (1578–1649) *Relazione delle quattro parti del mondo* (c. 1631) and through the actions of prominent figures, positioned Rome in direct opposition to the theories of sovereignty embodied by the emerging nation-states. It presented a vision of an open, universal, and ever-expanding space designed to embrace and harmonize a multitude of diversities. This contrasts sharply with the uniform, geometrically defined space of nation-states, bordered by rigid boundaries beyond which lay a perpetual state of *bellum omnium contra omnes*. The move toward a strongly geopolitical notion of “care” and the development of concepts like “propaganda” represent alternative attempts to govern space compared to those formulated within nation-states. Faced with the challenges posed by the all-encompassing nature of state sovereignty, the Roman Church and other institutions responded with very different mechanisms, structured around more fluid and inclusive spatial strategies.

The privileged position of the divine eye in the empirical representation of the world also legitimized the imperialist claims of European sovereigns. This is clearly evident in the cosmographic works of Guillaume Postel (1510–1581), which aimed to politically unify the world under a universal and Christian sovereign. By merging astrological and geographical speculation with pseudo-historical narratives, Postel urged his readers to imagine the world as an extension of divine and celestial spaces, and sovereignty as a synthesis of the spiritual and temporal dimensions of the entire cosmos.

Paolo Sarpi's (1552–1623) efforts to assert Venetian sovereignty involved a sophisticated reinterpretation of spatial and legal principles that emphasized the dynamic governance of political space. Sarpi's theoretical contributions provided a robust critique of ecclesiastical overreach and advocated for a model of state sovereignty deeply intertwined with territorial integrity and administrative autonomy.

Furthermore, the Dutch Republic during its Golden Age (c. 1588–1672) exemplified an innovative integration of maritime and terrestrial elements, reshaping traditional notions of territorial sovereignty through a flexible and adaptive governance model. This approach contrasted with the more static, land-centric paradigms of other European states and reflected the fluid and interconnected nature of political and economic life in the United Provinces.

Taken together, these diverse approaches illustrate how early modern thinkers reimaged space in ways that transcended the rigid, exclusionary models of emerging nation-states. By examining these multifaceted conceptions of space, the contributions to this volume underscore the complex and contested nature of spatial governance during

this transformative period, highlighting the dynamic interplay between space, power, and knowledge.

### 3. The cluster

Faced with the challenges posed by the all-encompassing nature of state sovereignty – as encapsulated by Sarpi’s paraphrase of Bodin, sovereignty is either absolute or it does not exist – the Church of Rome responded with very different mechanisms. By criticizing this perspective, structured around a geometric and uniform spatiality aimed at excluding all competing forms (for instance through the concept of the pontiff’s *potestas indirecta*), Alberto Fabris’s contribution, “‘Worldwide vigilance and pastoral care’: a genealogy of the concept of ‘propaganda,’” analyzes the genesis of the concept of “propaganda” as developed by the Congregation of the same name. Fabris argues that the concept has its roots in the politicization of space that dominated the Italian context throughout the sixteenth century. Specifically, the author examines how Rome responded to the challenge of sovereignty by redefining a term that was unusual but etymologically linked to conquest and territorial expansion. It did so by linking the conquest and exercise of influence over territories to an understanding of the human geography that constituted them. Bolstered by a “truly global vision” developed through its extensive diplomatic network, the Church thus attacked the mechanism of sovereignty by eroding the spatiality that supported it.

The central argument of the article is that the *cura universalis*, neither *potestas* nor *auctoritas*, embodied by Roman “spiritual imperialism” required a constant understanding of and engagement with the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural elements, as well as the physical features, that marked each territory, in contrast to the smooth space, cleansed of all these variables, over which sovereignty was exercised. Fabris thus underscores that modernity cannot be encapsulated by a single paradigm or confined to a single space.

Like the first article, the second, “Representation of space(s): cosmography and world history in Guillaume Postel’s *De universitate liber* (1552),” revolves around the politicization of global space through an examination of the French scholar Guillaume Postel’s *De universitate liber* of 1552. Maria Vittoria Comacchi offers a novel perspective on Postel’s universalism and his conceptualization of the world as a global space. Although Postel’s approach to the issue of space and power may seem more oblique than that of the early modern scholars investigated in this cluster, Postel’s cosmography responded to the challenges of his time, to new scientific practices, and to the emergence of a new historical awareness by attempting to grasp the spatiality of the world as a whole.

Comacchi shows that at the heart of *De universitate* is a political articulation of cosmic and world space that seems to draw almost exclusively on mystical traditions. Revisiting Postel’s complex and widely debated idea of *restitutio* as the reestablishment of a glorious Christian past, the author focuses not on the traditional theme of religious concord, but on the role that Postel attributes to the royal or imperial sovereign, and his ability to (legitimately, according to Postel) conquer and rule over the world, as the key to understanding the ideas expressed in *De universitate*. The article thus sheds light on the cultural context of France at the dawn of renewed scientific and academic interest in the field of cosmography, situating Postel’s cosmographical work within this framework.

By tracing Postel's interplay of diverse sources (biblical, Neoplatonic, medieval Aristotelian, Kabbalistic, Arabic, Latin, and Italian) and competing models of the world (theological, mystical, geographical, and historical) within a unified cosmic system, Comacchi takes us into Postel's mind. The spatialization of the world into geographical continents and political dominions emerges as a mirror image of the celestial space, where the metaphysical account of creation and the scientific measurement of both the heavens and the globe merge into a political-historical world order that has the sovereign at its apex. As such, the article significantly contributes to a more nuanced and enriched understanding of Postel's perspective on political authority and the role of cosmic spatialization. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of metaphysics, along with pseudo-history and historical geography, in early modern ways of imagining the world.

Gregorio Baldin's article on Paolo Sarpi, "Romulus was not less a prince than Trajan's: Paolo Sarpi, reader of Jean Bodin and theorist of sovereignty (The early *consulti*, 1606)," illustrates how the concept of sovereignty, developed in open opposition to ecclesiastical interference, drew strength from a clearly defined notion of political spatiality. Sarpi's approach to sovereignty was marked by his emphasis on the geographical and physical dimensions of state authority. Baldin revisits the Servite's argument and contends that, Sarpi, drawing on but going beyond Jean Bodin's foundational concepts in *Les six livres de la République* (1576), articulated a nuanced vision of sovereignty that was deeply intertwined with the control over and governance of territory. In contrast to traditional views that saw territory merely as a passive physical space, Sarpi – Baldin argues – redefined it as a politically activated sphere in which sovereignty was not only asserted but visibly enacted and maintained.

Accordingly, in his influential *consulti* during the interdict crisis, Sarpi championed the notion that the legitimacy of Venetian laws, particularly those over ecclesiastical decrees, was fundamentally rooted in the Republic's sovereign right to govern its territory. This view of territorial sovereignty extended beyond mere land ownership to encompass the broader jurisdictional and administrative authority to implement civil law within that space. Sarpi's insights reframed political space as an active element of sovereignty.

Baldin thus sheds new light on Sarpi's critical perspective, which linked the governance of space and the visibility of sovereignty. This redefinition emphasized that sovereignty was not only about the amount of land controlled, but also about how a state governed, legislated, and visibly exercised authority within its borders. Sarpi's arguments during this critical period not only defended the sovereignty of Venice against ecclesiastical encroachments, but also provided a sophisticated blueprint for understanding the modern state's relationship to its territory, highlighting the active role of political spaces in the narrative of governance. The article thus significantly contributes to an enriched understanding of political spatiality that marks a significant evolution in the discourse on sovereignty, foregrounding the dynamic interaction between legal authority and territorial management.

A further perspective is presented in Luigi Emilio Pischedda's contribution, "*Luctor et Emergo*: territorial sovereignty as a contested paradigm in the United Provinces," which examines the sovereignty-territory nexus in the context of the seventeenth-century United Provinces. In the Dutch Golden Age, the evolving notion of territorial sovereignty

diverged significantly from the static, land-centric paradigms prevalent in other contemporary European states. This divergence, as the author shows, was marked by an understanding of political space as dynamic and open to negotiation. Thus, Pischedda's main argument is that political thought in the United Provinces was not merely an abstraction, but a tangible interplay of space and sovereignty, in which the spatial element acquired a discourse autonomy that reshaped the relationship between territory and authority. The spatial philosophy embraced by the Dutch intertwined land and sea, challenging the rigidity of established political boundaries and proposing a governance model responsive to the shifts and flows of political, social, and economic life. In tracing the fluidity of the spatial imagination in the seventeenth-century United Provinces, Pischedda notes that this approach contrasted sharply with more traditional views, which tended to fix sovereignty within unyielding territorial boundaries.

The flexibility of Dutch spatial concepts allowed for a sovereignty that was less about imposing order on a static landscape and more about managing the complexities of a space shaped by both land and sea. This conceptualization – Pischedda ultimately argues – placed the Dutch Republic at the forefront of rethinking political geography, turning territorial sovereignty into a vibrant dialogue between land and maritime influences, rather than a mere assertion of control over a defined area. This innovative approach to sovereignty, which emphasized adaptability and the integration of diverse spatial realities, offered a model that differed markedly from the prevailing European conceptualization. It proposed that sovereignty could be both diffuse and specific, localized and expansive – a reflection not only of the physical geography of the Dutch Republic but also of its sociopolitical ethos, which valued negotiation, trade, and mobility. Thus, the article offers an innovative approach to the Dutch model of sovereignty that invites a reevaluation of how political spaces are constructed and governed, suggesting that the true measure of sovereignty may lie in its ability to adapt and respond to its environment, rather than in its ability to assert a rigid territorial claim.

## Notes

1. Although this introduction is the result of a collaborative effort, the first section, *Space(s) and power(s)*, from the beginning to “a ‘primitive relation between *Ortung* and *Ordnung*, placing and order”, and from “Building on these historiographical trends” to the end of the section, was written by Maria Vittoria Comacchi. The part of the first section from “Here, *Ortung* and *Ordnung* indicate a” to “economic and environmental dimensions of space” was written by Alberto Fabris, who also authored the second section, *One space to rule them all*.
2. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Space”.
3. See esp. Jammer, *Concepts of Space*; Koyré, *From the Closed World*; Grant, *Much Ado about Nothing*; Granada, “New Visions of the Cosmos”, 270–86; Vermeir and Regier, *Boundaries, Extents and Circulations*; Allemann, Jäger, and Mann, “Introduction”, 127–36.
4. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, 23.
5. Clegg, “Review of John Allen”, 114.
6. Cosgrove, “Landscape and *Landschaft*”, 69.
7. See Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, 13–39, 254–65.
8. Cosgrove, “Landscape and *Landschaft*”, 58.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Elden, “Reading Schmitt Geopolitically”, 23.

11. See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*; Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*.
12. See Delaney, *Territory*.
13. See Lacoste, *La géographie*.
14. An example of this historiographical approach, in addition to Schmitt's contributions, is Brunner, *Land and Lordship*.
15. See Besse, *Les grandeurs de la Terre*; Short, *Making Space*.
16. See esp. Lestringant, *L'atelier du cosmographe*; Buisseret, *Monarchs, Ministers, and Maps*; Harley, *The New Nature of Maps*; Thrower, *Maps & Civilization*. On the impact of new spatiality on political thought, see Galli, *Spazi politici*.
17. See, in particular, Pagden, *European Encounters*; Pagden, *Facing Each Other*; Bugge and Rubiés, *Shifting Cultures*; Rubiés, *Travellers and Cosmographers*; Marcocci, *L'invenzione di un impero*; Marcocci, *The Globe on Paper*.
18. Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers*, 2.
19. The traditional narrative that the Age of Exploration and the resulting intellectual ferment with its universalist worldviews were exclusively European phenomena has been widely challenged and revised in recent decades: see, for instance, Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*; Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*; Emiralioğlu, *Geographical Knowledge*.

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## Notes on contributors

*Alberto Fabris* is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He holds a Ph.D. from the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon and has conducted research and taught at institutions such as the Université Libre de Bruxelles and Johns Hopkins University. His work focuses on early modern philosophy, political thought, and psychoanalysis, with particular attention to figures like Machiavelli and Giordano Bruno. He has published extensively on the intersections of desire, power, and political institutions in Renaissance thought.

*Maria Vittoria Comacchi* (Ph.D., 2019) is an intellectual historian specializing in transcultural and cross-linguistic exchanges across the early modern Mediterranean. Her research explores Jewish and Christian intellectual exchanges and Europe's relationship with the Arabic and Ottoman worlds. Her main areas of interest include antiquarianism, cosmography, cartography, the history of religious-political ideas across imperial and religious boundaries, book history, and the circulation of Arabic manuscripts in Europe. She has been a Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow working at the Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Indiana University Bloomington, and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (2022–2025), a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute (2020–2021), and a Junior Postdoctoral Fellow at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies at the Universität Hamburg (2019–2020). She is currently working at the Università di Perugia on the cataloging project for the manuscript collection of the Library of the Sacred Convent of Saint Francis in Assisi.

**ORCID**

Alberto Fabris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1086-1288>

Maria Vittoria Comacchi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0869-7474>

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